

# CELEBRATING BIRCH

THE LORE, ART, AND CRAFT OF AN ANCIENT TREE



BY NORTH HOUSE FOLK SCHOOL



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*left*  
Nest of birch bowls, hand carved from green (fresh) birch log. Erv Berglund, Minnesota, 2006.

*right*  
*Birch Bark Pack.*  
Weaving based upon traditional Finnish pack basket. Charlie Mayo, Wisconsin, 1968.



# SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION:

## Reminiscing about the Beginnings of North House Folk School with Founder Mark Hansen

BETSY BOWEN, ANNE PRINSEN, AND SCOTT POLLOCK

North House Folk School is located in the small picturesque village of Grand Marais, Minnesota, on the north shore of Lake Superior. We are geographically closer to rugged Canada than to most of Minnesota. Here within the cluster of brightly painted wooden buildings on the harbor, a student of any age can learn in a small class to build a boat or a timber frame building, or to make a rustic wooden ale bowl by hand, paint decorative traditional Nordic designs on it, and even brew the beer to drink from it. We began ten years ago with one kayak-building class, one instructor, and 12 students and now host 249 classes, 91 instructors, and over 1,200 students from 33 states and five countries over the course of a year.

We believe that the point is not so much what object is made, but the experience. Our mission states that we “inspire the heart, hands, and mind.” We know that what people take away from here is not just a bowl, but a visceral and immediate experience of being part of the human community.

As we began to celebrate our first ten years by working on this book, we wondered what kind of unquenchable spark of faith and energy fired this spontaneous combustion. So we interviewed Mark Hansen, boat builder, woodworker, and instructor, to learn more about what the North House Folk School project meant to him in the early years:

“THIS IS ABOUT PEOPLE FEELING SUCCESSFUL. This curiosity is a result of a society that’s just gone specialized. And as people, we’re wired up to make shelter, food, and clothing just as our ancestors did. So there’s value in that. That stimulates the brain and the senses in ways that are really important.

“After the first kayak class I taught, I had a father and son combination who came up to me after the class, and the father broke down crying, in that it had changed his life, and it had

### North House Folk School MISSION

Enriching lives and building community by teaching traditional northern crafts in a student-centered learning environment that inspires the hands, the heart, and the mind.

Five basic tenets guide all programs and classes at the Folk School:

- Create a rich, positive environment that inspires lifelong learning in a noncompetitive setting.
- Help students recognize and develop their creativity, talents, and interests in a student-centered environment.
- Promote and preserve the knowledge, skills, crafts, and stories of the past and present.
- Foster the concept of intergenerational learning.
- Provide creative and meaningful opportunities for individuals, families, and groups.

changed his relationship with his son—he was emotionally just letting it all out. And it was great. It was just great.”

Mark moved to Grand Marais in 1980 with his wife, Wendy, and son, Dan, to live near Lake Superior. Though he worked as a social worker, he was never far from an absorbing hands-on experience—building boats, skis, an elevator for Dan’s wheelchair.

“In 1996,” Mark says, “I was teaching boat building for the local community education program, down at the Coast Guard boathouse. It was twelve people the first year and fourteen people the second year from the community and regionwide. I pretty much put together a kit for different sizes—students were all the way from elementary school through retirement age. It kind of became an event—people from town came down. A lot of people had never been down to the Coast Guard building—it’s a really nice building—yeah, it’s the people’s building; we own it. It was a lot of fun.”

THE CONCEPT OF A FOLK SCHOOL, and the philosophy of hands-on, equality-based learning, came to Mark through his family and his travels:

“I’d been to Norway several times and seen schools over there, and I was aware of [Niikolaj Frederik Severin] Grundtvig [an educator]—my grandfather was into Grundtvig and his philosophies—he [my grandfather] was a Lutheran minister. I thought about Grundtvig when I was formulating my ideas for this thing, read a lot of his writings, poems that he’d written, and was very impressed with his approach to education. There was a beauty

below  
Busy students during a North House course.

right top  
Mark Hansen, North House founder.

right bottom  
The Schooner Hjordis, North House’s classroom on the water.



“I was part of Mark’s first class. I’d never built a kayak before, much less anything. I’d work during the day, take calls from the Coast Guard shed, running up from time to time to the hospital. Building the kayak was empowering to all of us; as the month progressed, we worked harder and longer and later into the evening, pushed on by the progress of our neighbors. That first launching was a community event—twelve boats thrust into the East Bay like newly hatched ducks. Mark taught a second class the next spring. That summer, North House was born.”

—Dr. John Wood, physician and former Board President

“It was like family. Little potlucks all the time. It was a humanities class, really.”

—Mike Schelmeske, woodworker and instructor





in it in that there were no rules about how you did it—it was a loving process, about people.”

The ideas of respect for the dignity of each person and noncompetitive, uplifting learning experiences echoed strongly in Mark as he, with others, developed the philosophical base for North House Folk School:

“We just got rid of competition—which was perfect for me, because I have never been competitive. When people start to compete, I just walk away. The whole thing about grades and stars has always been to me just so much bull. My son, Dan, went to Montessori school and had a wonderful experience. It was a great school—he loved it—and then he had to go to kindergarten. He came home the first day of kindergarten saying, ‘How come everyone else got a Snickers bar and I didn’t?’ It was because he couldn’t work the scissors to make the cut—and so I was bound and determined to put this school together, to put a star on the map. We’re going to do a noncompetitive school here. None of these grades or snobbishness. None of that stuff. This is going to be about enjoying people.”

**NORTH HOUSE’S SENSE OF VALUE IN COMMUNITY** evolved into a long-term relationship with the City of Grand Marais. In 1996, the city had taken possession of land and buildings on the harbor that had been owned and developed since the 1930s by the U.S. Forest Service. After considering proposals from various established community groups, North House Folk School was awarded rental of this property through a month-by-month lease, now proceeding as a long-term partnership. The city took a risk before there was much to show. As Mark remembers:

“Basically, they said go ahead. I wasn’t surprised; I knew it would go—most of those classes pulled off. We had a big open house in May of 1997 and put together a board of directors. We had fiber and woodworking and birch bark, and then ran around the state and plugged it.

“It was just months and months of cleaning; it was just dirty; it was a mess. We worked mostly out of the Red Building; there was a little carpentry shop on the end, and then in the fall, we went over to the Blue Building and started there. It was pretty ragtag.

“We worked from seven in the morning until ten o’clock at night, every day, cleaning, teaching classes . . . there was always someone down there helping out.”



## REAL HUMAN LIFE

Niikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig, 1783–1872, advocated for the creation of a unique school that would serve the Danish people at all levels in society that would be of and for the people. His special passion was that these folk schools would give dignity to the life of the farmer. They would awaken a love of learning that would continue long after a student had finished the formal course of study. In his remarks to his first group of eight students, Grundtvig said, “I saw life, real human life, as it is lived in this world, and saw at once that to be enlightened, to live a useful and enjoyable human life, most people did not need books at all, but only a genuinely kind heart; sound common sense; a kind, good ear; a kind, good mouth; and then liveliness to talk with really enlightened people who would be able to arouse their interest and show them how human life appears when the light shines upon it.”\*



*top*  
Hand planes in North House’s wood shop.

*bottom*  
The workshop woodstove.

North House seems to be built on faith and enthusiasm. As Mark explains:

“Why did people dive in? I think people were interested in what was going to come up next. There was always something being cooked up—we’d have staff meetings every day for three hours. There was fighting, and napping, and hanging out in the evenings. It was fun, you know. There was excitement, anticipation—‘Wow, this is our space now; how do we do something with this?’ It was a time you could never think of replicating. I thought, ‘I’ll give it full blast here for three, four years, then someone else can do it.’ I wanted to have a place where I could teach and learn, without leaving town. So there were clearly selfish motives.”

**IN LARGE PART**, it was Mark’s obsession and commitment to the idea that made it happen. As local supporter Buck Benson recalls, “Once Mark started rolling on the North House project, he couldn’t talk about anything else. He would find a way to turn the conversation around. I thought I’d lost a friend.”

And what about Mark’s family during the intense startup time? “Wendy was part of lots of conversations,” Mark says. “I went part-time on my job; then I left my job, a retirement plan and all, so she earned all the money for the family. I said, ‘I think I should do this,’ and she said, ‘Yup, we’re going to do it.’

“A lot of instructors were calling us wanting to teach here. That was a great surprise. The other surprise was all the volunteer hours that people put in, people from the churches, from the town, people that are still coming down—they come down, haul stuff, scrub stuff. It was a big surprise. But we were all volunteering, and when you do that, something that is for the common good, you stand on holy ground. And you can ask people for money for something other than yourself. And they feel honored that they are being asked. We just did a lot of begging, with the philosophy that if the whole thing failed, we could always say we’re sorry and we should have known better than to think we could do something like this. This is big medicine.”

And now ten years later?

“Yeah, oh gosh yes, I still feel the enthusiasm here. I have a good time teaching. But would I do it again—the school? Now? I don’t think I’d have the energy to do it now. I sure am glad I did it. Oh yeah, it was definitely worth it. In ten years, I’ve had hundreds and hundreds of students. Made, like, thirty boats here. It’s been a busy ten years.”

“One of my clearest memories of North House’s early days is of Mark sitting at the kitchen table putting together a list of classes, calling instructors, and arranging dates and times for a school that did not yet exist. Days later, a catalog was printed featuring twenty-some classes such as reindeer handling and kantele [a Finnish musical instrument] making with photographs and course descriptions, and still no confirmed location or building to house any of it. It was then that I knew this thing was going to happen. There would be no stopping it! The idea of a folk school, a people’s school, that would preserve our rich northern culture through hands-on, noncompetitive learning really ignited the imaginations of so many talented people. It felt to me like spontaneous combustion. Skilled crafters, organizers, office managers, seafarers, educators showed up ready to volunteer their time. North House had a way of using every bit of talent of all who came its way—and it still does.”

—Wendy Hansen, volunteer

“The lively conversations and happy activity that pervade North House were there right from the start. The thing I remember the most about preparing for the first classes was the ‘sweat equity’ of so many people who had caught the ‘NHFS Bug,’ many hours of sweeping and shoveling and disposing of debris.”

—Peter Barsness, instructor and former Director

“Before the name, before the location, the concept just made sense. Offer people an opportunity to make stuff—it just wasn’t out there; it wasn’t happening. That first catalog, with maybe twenty-two courses, was published without having a home. And the optimism of it, it made sense; it was about the opportunity.”

—Tom Healy, instructor and former Executive Director

\* Steven M. Borish, *The Land of the Living: The Danish Folk High Schools and Denmark’s Non-Violent Path of Modernization* (Nevada City: Blue Dolphin Publishing Inc., 1991).





# BIRCH LORE AND LEGENDS

“YOU SEE, THE BIRCH, WHICH GROWS ABOUT AS OLD AS A HUMAN BEING, IS REALLY THE MOST MAGICAL AND BEAUTIFUL OF ALL TREES . . .”

—*Lise Lunge-Larsen, folklorist and storyteller*

Because the birch met so many practical needs, it is no surprise that the tree soon found itself a place in the lore of many cultures of the world. From poetry and literature to history and myth, we'll take a look at birch's place and significance throughout the ages.





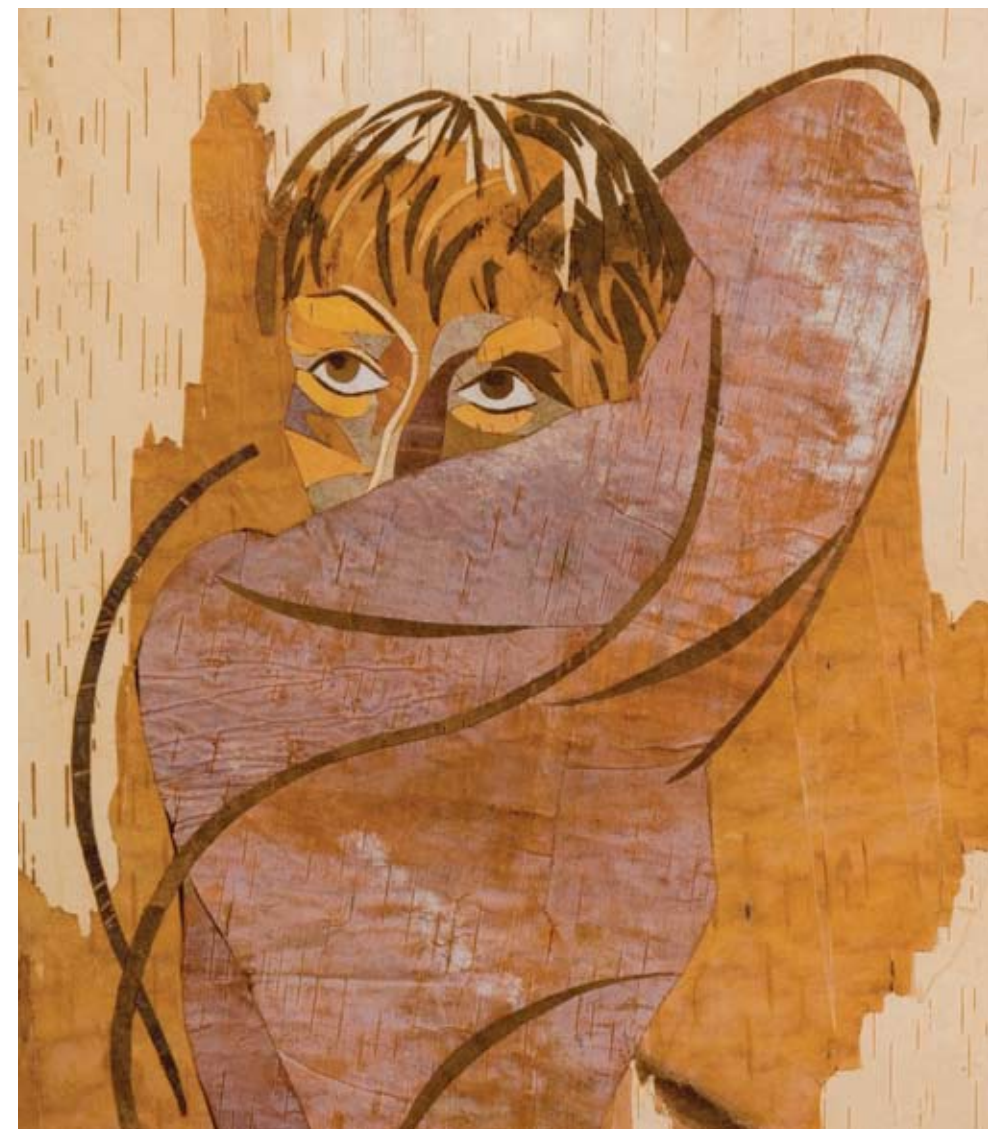
*left*  
*Birch Stand—Summer*  
 (batik). Gail Hedstrom,  
 Minnesota, 2005.

*right*  
*The Immigrant.* Birch bark  
 collage. Dominique Leroy  
 Prince, Minnesota, 2006.

## TRADITIONS AND SYMBOLS OF BIRCH

The birch has been important to people wherever it grows, and there are countless traditions and stories connected to it. In Scandinavian mythology, the birch is consecrated to Thor, the god of thunder. Thor is the strongest of all the gods, but because thunderstorms occur most often in spring and because the rain makes everything grow, Thor is also associated with fertility and rebirth. Since birch is Thor's tree, it was thought to have many protective qualities, and a birch branch attached to a house would protect the occupants from all kinds of trouble, especially lightning, the evil eye, gout, and barrenness.

In Celtic lore, the birch holds a similarly high position. The ancient Irish Tree Alphabet begins with the letter B (beth), which means "birch." Birch is also a symbol of new beginnings and a symbol of young love. In Wales, for example, a girl would give her sweetheart a piece of birch as a love token. The gift was a sign that the young man could begin his courtship.







# BIRCH WOOD

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“THERE IS MORE TO THE BIRCH TREE  
THAN THE BARK ITSELF. AMONG ARTISTS AND  
CRAFTSPEOPLE, BIRCH WOOD IS ALSO DESIRABLE.”

—John Zasada, forester and instructor

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While the use of birch bark has long been celebrated as an essential ingredient for traditional craft, the wood of the tree has also been utilized in a variety of ways. Often worked and carved “green,” the wood’s strength and beautiful grain are attributes that are both of value to traditional craft artisans. Burls and other types of character wood are also highly sought after.



# *The Craftsmanship of Risk:* TURNED BOWL

ROGER ABRAHAMSON

Ale bowls were common utensils on farms and in homes of the past in northern Europe and America. Most families had one big communal bowl that sat in the center of their table. The oldest wooden bowl currently known was found in Italy and dates back to 700 BC.

Turning a bowl is simply a learned skill set, no different from learning to make a sandwich. It's the craftsmanship of risk, much like North House's entire vision. If you make a mistake and go all the way through the wood, there's no need to worry . . . you're simply left with a strainer. And you always have the opportunity to try again.



## *Materials*

- ◆ Green birch log, length equal to diameter
- ◆ Small broad ax or side hatchet
- ◆ Carving ax
- ◆ Dividers
- ◆ Brace and  $\frac{3}{4}$ " spoon or other drill bit
- ◆ Mandrel with  $\frac{3}{4}$ " round tenon
- ◆ Small piece of birch bark
- ◆ Spring pole lathe
- ◆ Larger straight-shaft hook tool
- ◆ Small curved-shaft hook tool
- ◆ Carving scorp or hook knife
- ◆ Paper bag
- ◆ Sandpaper
- ◆ Linseed oil (optional)





# CONTRIBUTORS



## ROGER ABRAHAMSON

### *How-to Craft Artist*

Roger is a traditional bowl turner. Using a spring pole lathe, hand-forged tools, and freshly harvested native woods, he specializes in the creation of Norwegian ale vessels. His fascination for these objects has its roots in his immigrant grandmother's ale bowl, which is still in the family. He has been a turner for eighteen years, working with a pole lathe exclusively for the past twelve.



## BETSY BOWEN

### *Illustrations, Design, Editorial Team*

Betsy spends her days happily making woodblock prints and writing and illustrating children's books. Her social life is based around North House committee meetings. She lives on an old homestead near Grand Marais with her photographer/geographer husband.



## PHILIP BOWEN

### *Principal Photographer*

Philip began his photographic work as a youth, with black-and-white film and a darkroom in the pantry of his family's farmhouse. He now shoots sports events in North America and Europe, when he is not coaching or playing Ultimate Frisbee or cross-country ski racing. Phil and his wife recently moved to Uganda.



## MARK HANSEN

### *Contributing Craft Artist*

Mark has a particular interest in workboats of the North and has studied boat building in Greenland and in Norway. He has built birch bark canoes, Greenland kayaks, Umiaks, Norse prams, and a variety of traditional wooden sail and rowboats of the North. His other interests include winter camping with a traditional outfit, wooden skis, and birch toboggans. Actively involved in the founding of North House Folk School, Mark has been teaching since 1995 and operates Hansen Boat Works.



## JOANNE HART

### *Contributing Poet*

Joanne has made her home on the Grand Portage Reservation since 1972, and she writes poetry to acknowledge the respect for life she is so often taught to recognize there. Joanne has been writing poetry since she was a child. Her craft is currently fostered by the place at Pigeon River where she lives gratefully with the isolation of wilderness and the support of the community of Grand Portage Anishnabeg. She has eight grown children who continue to inspire her life.



## JULIE KEAN

### *Contributing Craft Artist*

Julie has been making baskets and ornaments since 1981. She utilizes materials gathered from the woods around her home in Hovland, Minnesota. Her favorite materials are birch bark and red osier dogwood. In 2001, her artistic talents were featured on the program *Venture North* on public television. At times, Julie integrates other natural materials into her work, including pinecones, driftwood, and spruce roots.



## LAYNE KENNEDY

### *Contributing Photographer*

An editorial photographer, Layne shoots feature assignments for a variety of magazines worldwide. His two most recent books focus on the Minnesotan region: *Jewels on the Water—Lake Superior's Apostle Islands* and *Minnesota—Yesterday and Today*. He is currently working on two new book projects, *Invisible Landscapes from the Edges of America* and a book on Iceland. Layne conducts two seasonal photography workshops at the North House Folk School.



## FRED LIVESAY

### *Contributing Craft Artist*

Fred discovered his woodworking skills at age 10. He later trained as a wheelwright and carriage builder for seven summers and then went on to study Scandinavian folk art, decorative arts, art history, and museum studies. Fred is currently a museum consultant but still finds time to build and repair fine furniture, carve spoons, turn bowls, weave baskets, and do handiwork of all kinds. Fred has taught at North House Folk School since its beginning and also instructed at the American Swedish Institute.



## LISE LUNGE-LARSEN

### *Contributing Writer*

Lise, a native of Norway, is a professional storyteller and award-winning children's book author. When she's not traveling to tell stories or busy writing, she can be found at her home in Duluth, Minnesota, working on her garden, biking or hiking in summer, and cross-country skiing in winter. Birch is her favorite tree.



## CHARLIE MAYO

### *Contributing Craft Artist*

Since the 1970s, Charlie has had a consuming interest in birch bark. He has traveled to Scandinavia many times to study with the masters while pursuing this interest. He has demonstrated at Rice Lake Audubon, the American Swedish Institute, Luther College, Norsk Høstfest, and the Minnesota State Fair. Charlie is a founding board member of North House Folk School.





**KURT MEAD**

*Contributing Craft Artist*

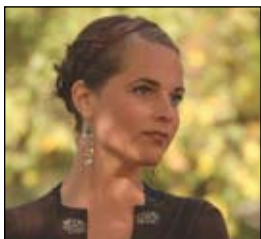
Author of the award-winning field guide *Dragonflies of the North Woods*, Kurt is a passionate dragonfly enthusiast who has given dragonfly presentations and workshops across Minnesota and traveled as far as Sweden (the birthplace of Kubba) to pursue his love of dragonflies. He has biology and art degrees from the University of Minnesota at Duluth and was drawn north by love and to work as a naturalist at Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center. He is now a stay-at-home dad, an author, a homesteader, and a part-time naturalist and has hopes of never working a full-time job again. Kurt makes Kubba sets from birch harvested sustainably from his homestead and is also North House Folk School's Kubba expert. He claims to be the Roadkill King of Finland, Minnesota.



**SCOTT POLLOCK**

*Design, Celebrating Birch Exhibit Curator*

"Building the bridge between tradition and an aspiring set of human hands" best describes Scott's interest and investment at the North House Folk School. Scott spends his workday visiting with a group of devoted educators to develop programs for North House. When not crafting it out on the keyboard, he can be found keeping the lights on in the woodshop carving toys, boats, and skis—all benefits of having time off to spend with his two young boys, scraping out a playful existence in the North Woods.



**ANNE PRINSEN**

*Manuscript, Design, Editorial Team*

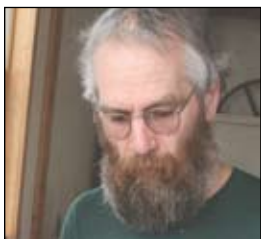
Anne grew up around birch trees. When she was little, she began thinking of stories during car trips out West to avoid her pesky older brother. Her passions still lie with words, trips, and thoughtful design.



**HARLEY REFSAL**

*Manuscript, Editorial Team, Contributing Craft Artist*

Harley is an internationally recognized folk artist who specializes in Scandinavian-style flat-plane figure carving, a minimalist style that leaves the tool marks exposed. He has won numerous carving awards and has taught carving classes throughout the United States, Canada, and Scandinavia. In 1996, he was decorated by the government and King of Norway for his contributions to Norwegian folk art studies. He is the author of *Art and Technique of Scandinavian-Style Woodcarving*. In addition to his carving and teaching, Harley is a professor of Norwegian language and Scandinavian folk art at Luther College, Decorah, Iowa. He has also served on the North House Folk School Board.



**MIKE SCHELMESKE**

*Contributing Craft Artist*

Mike's interest in Native American and Scandinavian traditions has kept him constantly pursuing boreal forest crafts and materials for project ideas. He particularly finds utility craft intriguing, and the thought of putting his crafts to work on an everyday level keeps him searching for the next project. Whether it's carving toys from basswood blanks for his daughter, Aurora, or shaping canoe paddles from a crooked knife he fashioned from an old file, Mike's ingenuity and his approach to craft are refreshing.



**LARRY SCHMITT**

*Contributing Craft Artist*

Recently, Larry has become interested in radical natural dyes—the exploration of the discovery of natural dye processes. Larry teaches nålbinding, weaving, and other fiber arts courses at North House Folk School. He came to the fiber arts by learning nålbinding from his parents. Larry has been involved in teaching and researching nålbinding for more than twenty-five years. The instructional manuals he has written on the subject are some of the only resources on nålbinding in English.



**JON STROM**

*Contributing Craft Artist*

Look for the wood chips flying and you're sure to find Jon. Jon is a sculptor, woodworker, and log builder with a strong interest in Swedish spoon- and bowl-carving techniques as well as the history of log building. He has demonstrated at Grand Portage National Monument, Old Fort William, and White Oak Society and has taught at various workshops.



**DEBORAH SUSSEX**

*Principal Photographer*

As a photographer, Deborah has traveled extensively both in the United States and abroad while on assignment for numerous national publications. An avid Nordic skier, cyclist, and back-country camper, she lives with her husband in Ely, Minnesota.



**GREG WRIGHT**

*North House Folk School Executive Director*

Chasing horizons in the North has been a preoccupation of Greg's for many years now. An avid wilderness traveler by water, ski, and foot, Greg has journeyed across much of northern North America, exploring the traditional waterways of the Canadian Shield in wood-canvas canoes, encountering elemental landscapes and echoes of Arctic cultures while paddling Arctic rivers in the barren lands, and engaging the North's defining season of white on skis and snowshoes at every opportunity. Greg became North House's Executive Director in 2001, bringing with him numerous years of experience in his craft, educational, and nonprofit leadership. Greg, his wife, and their daughter live just outside of Grand Marais, Minnesota, on their homestead with organic gardens, beehives, a wood-fired timbered sauna, and a view of the northern horizon.



**JOHN ZASADA**

*Manuscript, Editorial Team, Contributing Craft Artist, Celebrating Birch Exhibit Curator*

The biology, ecology, use, and management of birch in northern forests has been a favorite topic of John's for many years. He is a recently retired research forester and has worked with birch in Alaska, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. He began taking classes at North House with Charlie Mayo and has continued to try to understand the growth and use of birch and other tree barks; he also enjoys experimenting with birch bark weaving.



# FOR THE LOVE OF BIRCH



Known as the Mother Tree by some, the birch has been significant to the well-being of civilizations in the Northern Hemisphere since the last ice age. The unlimited uses and applications of this distinctive and graceful tree have served many cultures; thus, the birch is celebrated in countless traditions, histories, and myths.

In *Celebrating Birch*, North House Folk School, a community created to encourage lifelong learning through the teaching of traditional crafts, introduces a broad history of the birch—from its biology and ecology to its place in the practical and spiritual aspects of many northern cultures. In addition, included are 20 beautiful and practical projects to create, including a woven bark basket, carved box, and turned wooden bowl. More than just a tree, the birch is a link to our common human past that enriches the lives, hearts, and minds of those who work with it.

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